

DEMOCRATIC PROCESS IN UU DECISION-MAKING

Thoughts before a Congregational Meeting

5th UU Principle: The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large

The United States is a representative democracy or republic, but UU Congregations are really closer to a direct democracy. Actions taken by the appropriate majority of members at a duly called Congregational Meeting are binding upon the congregation. We do elect members to the board and certain offices and committees, but any major decision comes to a duly called congregational meeting. Unitarian Universalists are pretty serious about democracy in society as well as in our congregations. This fits our 5th Principle which affirms *the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large*, and also our 2nd Principle: which calls for *Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations*. We believe that people should have a voice and a vote on what happens in society and in our congregations, and we call for justice and compassion to be primary values. UU congregational meetings, like old-time General Assemblies, can involve some pretty heated debate by persons with strong opinions and passionate feelings, but generally we all try to remember the inherent worth and dignity of our fellow members and to treat each other with respect. UUs often go to special pains to hear persons expressing minority positions on different issues even when later votes show almost unanimous support for the majority position. Some people thrive on debate, while others are uncomfortable with any disagreement so we try hard to balance discussion with respect.

In some areas of church life, such as worship, the minister is given lots of responsibility and some authority, while the board is delegated fiduciary and other responsibility, but in most parts of church life, actual authority rests in decisions of the congregation. When the congregation only meets for an annual meeting, this can lead to a good bit of uncertainty and put extra responsibility on the board, so it is often helpful to have at least one additional congregational meeting each year.

The role of churches and other religious organizations is changing in America and many other parts of the world. While some fundamentalists want the church to take several steps back, UU and other more progressive religious communities are more affected by discoveries of science and therefore are reacting to new understandings of evolution, universal cosmology, and the relationships between plants, animals, the earth and the gods (if any). Among other things the number of people actively involved in churches and other religious communities is decreasing, while other activities such as soccer leagues take young families away on Sundays. While churches were once the center of the larger community, they are now just one choice among many offering places for the like-minded to gather. Even UUs, who may find few like-minded individuals in some conservative communities, too often do not make time or effort to attend UU congregations.

There are still opportunities for us amidst the downward trend in church attendance. Many of the now un-churched are more like UUs in beliefs, practices, and values than they are like other religions. Since we do not demand adherence to unseen beings nor to ancient values or practices, we should be more attractive to lots of un-churched people. Even so, our low visibility and small numbers may continue to result in the continuing slow decline in membership of the last couple years both nationally and locally. If more people knew about Unitarian Universalism, we would probably find it easier to attract new members and friends but such is not currently the case. The prevalence of introverts among UUs doesn't help the effort to make us more visible either! And yet, the acceptance, inclusiveness, curiosity, and creativity of Unitarian Universalists ought to make us one of the most attractive groups for many people to join!

After today's Congregational Meeting everyone is invited to gather to talk about beginning an ongoing strategic planning process. It is time that we think more seriously about who we are and how we will offer ministry in the future. Ministry and Church Life are changing in this 21st Century and we need to be better prepared to effectively respond!

The life of any congregation, and especially smaller ones depends on the energy, enthusiasm, relationships, and commitment of members and friends.

Ministers and other leaders can offer structure and ideas, but no congregation will ultimately succeed if members and friends are not actively supporting it and working to create an inviting, accepting, and beloved community.

Respecting others within and outside of the congregation is a really important part of congregational life. The relationships between members and friends is also really important in the life of a congregation. Without respectful relationships congregations are rarely able to do more than just get by, and in the church life climate of this new century, getting by may not be enough.

Before I retire or otherwise move on, I would really like to see First UU Church thriving. There are many ways to help that happen, but it will take a commitment to engage in one of the processes that will help. We have a long history as a congregation, we are known for our social justice efforts and for welcoming newcomers, but we have a limited level of visibility in the community. We are becoming more active with PACT as it transitions to a single organization for the Central Valley, and our members are involved with multiple charities and service organizations, but we are not currently associated strongly with any such effort. I hope that this will change as we make decisions about what we can work together to support. The effectiveness of UU efforts when they are harnessed together can be amazing, world changing!

So today we receive the reports from the Board, Officers, staff and Committees. We are asked to approve the budget for the coming year and to elect new officers and board members. This is part of the ongoing life and work of this and every congregation. Within the budget there are funds to support the committees, the staff and ministry, and a small amount to keep us connected to the Unitarian Universalist Association, the Western Region, and the Pacific Central District. We did not get the increase in pledge support for which we asked, so this is a bare-bones budget rather than one that will allow us to expand ministries and programs. But much of the work of the church continues to be accomplished by unpaid volunteers who show up for meetings and work days, help with services and religious education, and do whatever is necessary to keep the church going. The church will always depend on volunteers, even though more of the work has been put into the hands of staff and religious professionals in recent decades as congregations age and families require income from all adult members.

The role and importance of congregations has changed considerably over the late 20th and early 21st Centuries. The question of how those roles will have changed by mid-century and beyond is wide open for visionaries to consider. Many of us will be gone by that time, but decisions we make now may make a huge difference in the church of the future! In the early 19th Century, both the Unitarians and Universalists considered themselves Christian, though with some particular perspectives that had earned them the label heretic. By the middle of the 20th Century Unitarian Universalism was largely humanistic. By the late 20th Century and up to today, various spiritual perspectives were gaining prominence, some Buddhist, some Christian, some Pagan as well as a variety of other beliefs. Often in recent decades it has been easier to state what we aren't than what we are! A few years back the Standing on the Side of Love movement became the most visible sign of Unitarian Universalism. We are many things to many people!

We do not rely on the fear of hell or the hope of heaven to win converts or retain members, rather our message must be one of loving acceptance, respect and inclusion. Since our shared beliefs constitute neither creed, doctrine, nor dogma, but only principles and traditions, we do not often attract newcomers with elevator speeches. It takes time to explain who we are and why we gather and I have always thought that UUs need a high tolerance for ambiguity and a drive to create their own theology and other statements of belief! We are not an easy religion because we give people too many choices, too much of an opportunity to believe, if not quite anything, whatever fits their own inclinations and consciences within the wide boundaries of our values and principles.

I don't know about the rest of you, but I vacillate between optimism and pessimism both for the world and for the church! There are so many good possibilities and ideas here and around the world, but there are so many people and problems! I like to think that I am generally hopeful, but there are days, many of them during this election cycle when I just can't imagine that humanity or the world will survive! Sometimes I think that it would be great to live forever and continue to watch the human comedy, but there are other days when I am just as satisfied to realize that I am past my prime and far closer to retirement than to the beginning of my ministry! Not that I'm ready to throw in the towel, but.....

So where will we go from here as a congregation? We will make some important decisions today for the status quo of the congregation, but when will we take the time to look toward the future? I invite you all to stick around after the annual meeting to begin that conversation. We probably won't talk for long today, but I want to put a few ideas out and invite you to share your thoughts. A few people have already committed to a longer involvement in strategic planning, but today I would just like to generate some ideas. This is one way we continue to practice democracy as a congregation, and I hope you will each be involved when you can! The ideas shared today will be added to the ideas given to the Committee on Ministry and to the work of the Board and Program Council, and together we shall continue to do the work of ministry here at First UU Church of Stockton!

I thank you for your presence this morning and at the annual meeting and I encourage you to stay a little while to think about strategic planning!

May this congregation continue to find life and success from the commitment and the efforts of each of you! So may it ever be! Amen!